Royal Oak Journal

N.Y. Times 5/25/92 p. L7, col 1-5

Bitter Memories of Anti-Semitism Live On in Michigan Parish

By DORON P. LEVIN
Special to The New York Times

ROYAL OAK, Mich., May 24 — Driving past the low-slung houses and shops along oodward Avenue just north of Deoit, motorists are momentarily disacted by an imposing five-story nestone structure adorned with an ormous bas relief of Jesus Christ. ıe tower is part of the Shrine of the ttle Flower, a Roman Catholic urch that earned notoriety as a ene of vivid, mass bigotry during e Depression.

A half century after the fact, the gotry is just a dim memory to most eryone but its targets. Indeed, anger parishioners do not know ıch about the church's history. But on May 11, 100 supporters of Ecumenical Institute for Jewishristian Studies in Southfield, Mich., hered in the church here to rember.

"I would change history if I could," Msgr. Alex J. Brunett told the audience. In the name of the church he apologized, saying, "We need to find forgiveness in our lives whenever possible."

Rabbi M. Robert Syme of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield, Mich., replied: "The Shrine of the Little Flower was known as a place of hatred for Jews, blacks and all minorities. It is important to remember the past but not to become paralyzed by it." Several of Rabbi Syme's congregants, still embittered about what had happened at the church, had urged him to stay away, he said.

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The cause of this bitterness stretches back more than five decades. Starting in 1938, the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin delivered hypnotic, anti-Semitic orations from his pulpit at Little Flower. His messages, carried by the CBS Radio Network, reached audiences of 40 million, and crowds that numbered as high as 25,000 gathered on Woodward Avenue to hear Father Coughlin speak. Like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Goebbels, Father Coughlin was in the vanguard in using the electronic media's ability to influence political opinion and raise money.

An hour of religious instruction for children when it began in 1926, Father Coughlin's Sunday broadcast evolved into populist critiques of the Depression. In the end, it degenerated into diatribes against Jews, communists, the New Deal and the forces of Satan.

After the start of World War II, Federal prosecutors threatened to try Father Coughlin for sedition because he expressed sympathy with the Nazis, and in 1942 the church hierarchy forced him off the air. Father Coughlin spent the rest of his career more quietly, retiring from Little Flower in 1966. He died in 1979.

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In an odd twist, the Shrine of the Little Flower was originally erected in response to religious prejudices of a different kind. The great stone tower, symbolizing the cross that could not be burnt down, had been built after Ku Klux Klan rallies, cross burnings and other anti-Catholic agitation took place in the middle-income neighborhood.

Jews around the nation, and especially those in Detroit, felt terror when Father Coughlin took to the airwaves. "After those Sunday broadcasts, Jewish factory workers were afraid to go to work the next day," said Sidney Bokolsky, a professor of history at the University of Michigan in Dearborn. Myron L. Milgrom, 62 years old and now the co-owner of a paint company in Detroit, recalled: "His words were horrible. I was only 11, but I remember."

Mr. Milgrom added, "We wanted to know, 'Was this the way all Catholics believed?' "

Jews feared condemnation from friends and co-workers who, at Father Coughlin's urging, might blame them for the Depression. To this day, the very name of the church evokes bitterness among Jews who recall that period — as Father Brunett discovered while visiting a hospitalized parishioner: "The man in the next bed, a Jewish fellow, was quite ill. He asked me where I was from, and when I told him the Shrine of the Little Flower, he said, 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself.' "

Efforts to heal rifts between Detroit's Catholics and Jews have been determined, though sporadic. The Rev. James R. Lyons, a Congregational minister, founded the Ecumenical Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies 10 years ago to fight prejudice.

But the legacy of hate dies hard. On the evening that Rabbi Syme, Monsignor Brunett and Mr. Lyons spoke at the church, a lone man stood across the street holding a sign that read: "Father Coughlin was on target concerning the Jewish Communist conspiracy."

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